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ABSTRACT

LIBECON2000 is a project funded by DG13 of the European Commission within the Telematics Applications Programme that will run for three years (until early 2001). The project collects and publishes library statistics of 29 European countries on its World Wide Web site, http://www.libecon2000.org. This paper gives an account of the project's progress and speculates about the future of the collection and publication of library statistics at the international level, including consideration of the roles of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and ISO (International Organization for Standardization). (Author/MES)

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LIBECON2000 and the Future of International Library Statistics

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Abstract

LIBECON2000, is a project funded by DG13 of the European Commission within the Telematics Applications Programme and will run for 3 years (until early 2001). The project collects and publishes library statistics of 29 European countries on its web-site, www.libecon2000.org.This paper gives some account of the project's progress and speculates about the future of the collection and publication of library statistics at the international level, including consideration of the roles of UNESCO and ISO.

Paper

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF LIBECON2000

Libraries are developing an ever increasing role in the supply of knowledge and it is estimated that at the beginning of the decade in the main countries of Europe, total expenditure on libraries amounted to 8.45 billion euros per year. As we progress to the end of the century, rapid progress in methods of distributing knowledge by electronic means is being made and librarians are playing a key role in managing this information revolution. In this context, we have a concern to monitor the economic place which libraries occupy and it is the objective of LIBECON2000 to provide the appropriate statistical evidence to better inform policy judgements and investment appraisals by international, national and local governments and the private sector. A network of contacts representing the 474,000 staff employed in the libraries industry has been established to co-ordinate the return of statistical information on a regular basis and these data, and useful source references, are maintained on the LIBECON 2000

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web-site [1].

The LIBECON2000 project is funded by the European Commission until 2001, by which time a rich source of important research material will have been collated. This will provide the basis for a "Millennium Study" of the economic importance of libraries. The work is being undertaken by the National Library of the Czech Republic, the Library Information Statistics Unit and the Institute of the Public Finance, which compiles all statistics for local government services in the United Kingdom.

The project collects statistical data about European libraries and publishes the data on the web and in print. Neither activity is unique. UNESCO, which pioneered standardisation in this field has also been publishing library statistics of many countries for many years and recently has aimed to cover the six standard sectors on a three-year cycle. There are a number of sites where library statistics can be found, though few European countries are covered in this way. This material is ideal for web publishing which can:

- Overcome language barriers
- Potentially achieve more rapid publication than print [though LIBECON currently draws mainly on published sources]
- Achieve more effective dissemination than print sources to users who are scattered and mainly require facts rather than whole publications
- Facilitate communication between producers and users.

What LIBECON2000 does is both more extensive and more limited than what UNESCO has done. It is more limited in that it covers only 29 countries [comprising EU members, signatories to the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) and the Association Agreement with the EU in Central & Eastern Europe (C&EE)], whereas UNESCO aims to cover the whole world. It is more extensive in that it asks more questions [see coverage outlined below in Figure 1] and attaches importance to financial data which are presented in standardised form [euros] and not in national currencies. It also has the resources to check more thoroughly with its sources and, unlike UNESCO, it estimates to compensate for missing data and provides a bibliography, list of contacts and translations of major column headings in the original publications. Like UNESCO, LIBECON2000 surveys countries, not libraries. In other words, it does not undertake primary survey work. It goes beyond UNESCO also in publishing a commentary on trends. Previous publications in the series include Library Economics in Europe [2] and Library Economics in Central and Eastern Europe [3]. The data, though not the text, from these publications is on the LIBECON2000 web-site [www.libecon2000.org]. The web-site is being updated all the time with new data as it becomes available. A commentary on the trends up to 1998 will be delivered at the end of 1999 and will be published on the web-site and possibly in print.

A major objective of LIBECON2000 is to create a virtual community of those who create and use library statistics of European countries. The European focus of the project arises from the policy aims of its funding body, the European Commission, and the work could usefully be extended more widely if a way could be found to do so. The discussion area of the web-site is of course open to all but the project is mainly in contact with European practitioners and, of course, international bodies with an interest in this area. A major problem in assembling meaningful statistics is gaining access to information prepared to consistent definitions. ISO, the world-wide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies) undertakes the work of preparing International Standards through its technical committees. International organisations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work of refining the definitions, and LIBECON2000 will seek to inform the standards debate. Its ability to do this arises from the fact that it is one of the few organisations to have attempted to collate and compare library statistics from many countries and has first-hand experience of the pitfalls.

SOME PROBLEMS AND SOME ANSWERS

Gathering consistent information about the part played by libraries in developing the information resources within Europe is a difficult process and involves overcoming a number of practical problems. The major problem relevant to this paper is that one can only collect data which exists - unless one has budget for primary survey work, which would not be appropriate even if it were affordable as it would involve an additional survey burden and redoing the work of the responsible agencies at national or in some cases, provincial level. Using existing data presents some or all of the following problems, the position varying from country to country:

- Missing data, for example:
  - Missing data, for example:
    - Sectors missing [e.g. no survey or sampling of school libraries in many countries]
    - Sectors incomplete [libraries missing]
    - Sectors not internationally comparable [the Other Major Non-Specialised and the Specialised Sectors give the most headaches]
    - Data not available [questions not asked or not answered].
  - Language problems

To improve the quality of the data, all of these problems need to be addressed.

Missing sectors can probably only be addressed at the national level by would-be users of the data bringing pressure to bear on the relevant authorities and institutions to undertake the work. LIBECON2000 has had some success in a number of countries both in stimulating coverage of sectors which were not previously covered and in widening the scope of pre-existing surveys and promoting the adoption of standardised definitions. Public libraries, national libraries and higher education libraries are usually, but not always, covered in Europe. Coverage of schools and of the other two sectors is much rarer.

Incomplete sectors [i.e. sectors which need to be estimated] is also best tackled at national level but is not commonly attempted in the published documents. LIBECON2000 aims to do this using the advice of informed local sources. It is possible that a section in a revised ISO 2789 recommending that this be done and outlining an approved methodology could over time be influential and beneficial.

The remaining two problems are standardisation issues, though not easy to solve. The problem of **sectors not being internationally comparable** only partly relates to the way the definitions are applied. An example of this would be where one country decides to include only libraries above a certain size and another aims for complete coverage or where one includes all specialised libraries and another excludes those in the private sector. A more deep-seated difficulty arises when the institutional geography of countries is not aligned. Some countries may have many "other major non-specialised libraries" that directly effect other sectors such as the national or public or higher education sectors. Libraries of academies of science in some countries of Eastern Europe are an example of this. The fact that the term "major" is not defined in the Standard adds to the problem. Ideally there needs to be a forum where countries discuss such questions and find the best practical compromises. The forum envisaged is not TC46 [where the standard is defined] but a kind of implementation group. Unfortunately the IFLA conference would not be a suitable forum as most of the compilers and implementers of the standard are not librarians. In fact the forum probably needs to be a virtual one such as that provided by the LIBECON2000 web-site.

The problem of **non-availability** of data is one which the revisers of ISO 2789 should

be encouraged to tackle. Reading between the lines of the preface to ISO 2789, it seems clear that its authors had a limited objective in mind, namely to standardise the definitions used in the UNESCO questionnaire. If UNESCO did not ask the question then the authors did not attempt to define it. The UNESCO questionnaire has become the de facto standard for library statistical questionnaires and many countries do not venture outside its limits even though there is much more data which could usefully be collected for use at national level and some which seems essential at international level. This makes it difficult to get answers to new questions not already covered by the UNESCO questionnaire. UNESCO pioneered this area by adopting the *Recommendation concerning the international standardisation of library statistics* in 1970 which led to the publication of the first edition of the ISO Standard in 1974. Everyone interested in this field has reason to be grateful to UNESCO and of course UNESCO neither requests nor implies that national questionnaires be limited to the areas covered by its own forms. Unfortunately, some countries do confine their efforts at national level to answering the UNESCO questions. Arguably, this could be overcome, as it has been in many countries, by librarians and other would-be users of the data agreeing to national definitions for topics not covered by ISO 2789 and ensuring their adoption but it would be influential if ISO were to widen the range of its definitions somewhat to avoid wholesale reinvention of the wheel.

There is also a need at this time to begin a modernisation process and to widen the range of definitions in order to begin to recognise recent technological developments. Most European libraries, for example, would not now be thought by their users to reach adequate standards without pervasive use of Information and Communication Technologies including access to networked resources and the internet. Whilst definitions in this area remain somewhat problematic, it is clearly essential to tackle these questions. Failure to do so gives the impression that librarians think inter-library loans and microfilms are more relevant to their business than modern information transfer methods. It would also be useful if the revised ISO 2789 were to make recommendations about the presentation of the data. The use of graphs, ratios and time series in national publications would improve many of them enormously and there are examples of good practice on which to build. A recommendation from ISO that library statistical publications should include an English summary and a translation of the column headings would solve the language problem for many people. A translation of definitions would please the connoisseurs! A recommendation for parallel publication on the web would also be welcome.

SOME FUTURE CHALLENGES

The future of this activity [the collection and publication of library statistics on an international basis] is surrounded by some uncertainties at the time of writing. UNESCO, which has pioneered this work since the 1970s is reducing the numbers of its statistical staff and it is not clear what the consequences of this might be for library and other cultural statistics. EUROSTAT, which collects statistics for the European Union, has recently been asked to compile cultural statistics at the EU level but has not included libraries in its programme. LIBECON2000 will end in 2001 unless it is successful in obtaining a new lease of life in some form under the Fifth Framework Programme. Whilst this is likely to be the most pragmatic approach, it would be better if the initiative could extend its activities beyond Europe but this could only be achieved with funding from other sources. It seems highly desirable that a broader initiative should be established with a wider geographical remit.

At the same time, libraries and the world of information are changing rapidly as technologies change and governments emphasise the role of libraries in supporting education, social inclusion and economic growth as well as the more traditional cultural role. Digitisation is going ahead on a large scale in some countries, increasingly undertaken by libraries but not measured in the statistics. Questionnaires are routinely

used to measure quality and user satisfaction but are not yet recommended for use in the library statistics standard. Connectivity and access to electronic content are other major current concerns which the current statistics do not address.

Figure 1. Database Contents.

Diagram not available. Please contact authors.

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4. By sectors I mean types of libraries as defined in ISO 2789 [public libraries, national libraries etc.]

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